

# Israeli ambassador praises wartime pope

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(RNS) In a conciliatory gesture regarding one of the most sensitive points of Jewish-Catholic relations, Israel's ambassador to the Vatican praised the controversial wartime Pope Pius XII for his "actions to save the Jews" during the Holocaust.

Mordechay Lewy made his remarks Thursday (June 23) at a ceremony honoring an Italian priest who helped protect Jews during the Nazi occupation of Rome. The ambassador said many Catholic institutions in the city had hidden Jews from the Germans during mass arrests on October 16, 1943.

"There is reason to believe that this happened under the supervision of the highest Vatican officials, who were informed about" steps to protect Jews, Lewy said, according to the Reuters news agency.

"So it would be a mistake to say that the Catholic Church, the Vatican and the pope himself opposed actions to save the Jews. To the contrary, the opposite is true," Lewy added.

Critics say Pius, who reigned from 1939 to 1958, failed to do or say all he could to stop the Nazis' persecution and genocide of the Jews. "I am aware this is going to raise some eyebrows in the Rome Jewish community," Lewy said after the speech. "But this refers to saving Jews, which Pius did, and does not refer to talking about Jews, which he did not do and which Jews were expecting from him."

In December 2009, Pope Benedict XVI declared the Pius "venerable" and thus eligible for beatification, the rank just below sainthood.

Benedict has said he made his decision after an informal investigation of still-sealed wartime records in the Vatican Archives.

Pius "saved more Jews than anyone else," Benedict said, and failed to protest publicly only out of fear that the Germans would deport thousands of Jews under the church's protection.

Critics have called for those records to be made accessible to all scholars before the Vatican makes any decision on Pius's beatification or possible sainthood.